

Adivasi Wants Rights & Protection of Identity, Not Tokenism

Washing of feet of a tribal victim of an abhorrent crime does not compensate for the hurt and discrimination the Dalit and tribal individuals suffer from a drontes

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In a viral video, Pravesh Shukla, an alleged BJP worker, was seen urinating on an Adivasi labourer in the Sidhi district of Madhya Pradesh. This inhuman act is not just an error from an individual. Rather, this horrible incident is a sign of the deep rot in our society. It is a manifestation of the cultural arrogance and insensitivity of the caste elites backed up by the ruling establishment. It is also a tale of the failure of the government to fulfil its commitment to the welfare of the marginalized community.

But what is more shocking is the way the ruling BJP has tried to depoliticize the Adivasi question. It has again ap-

proached it in a patronizing manner. Once again, the community was looked at as an object of assimilation. The follow-up actions of the BJP government in poll-bound Madhya Pradesh, therefore, lack sincerity. They smack of mere tokenism.

After the eruption of public outrage against the incident, chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan was quick to realise the gravity of the situation. He was aware of the fact that the perpetrator of the crime was seen to be a member of his political outfit. He feared that the incident, if not managed soon, might cause big damage to the party in the upcoming assembly elections.

Swinging into the “damage control” mode, the BJP was quick to disown

30-year-old Shukla as its party member. The Madhya Pradesh police arrested him under the NSA. He was also charged with the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Later, a part of his house was bulldozed. Even the CM went on to wash the feet of the victim as a sign of “penance”. The act of washing the feet was recorded and the video was circulated through the media to give the impression that the BJP government would never tolerate injustice to the Adivasi community. Meanwhile, the Chouhan did not forget to carry forward the Sangh agenda by gifting the Adivasi victim an idol and putting a tikka on his forehead.

Around the same time, the chief minister’s office tweeted that “NSA has been used, a bulldozer has been rolled to demolish his house and if the situation demands, Mama ji [Shivraj Chauhan] will bury the criminal ten feet deep in the ground”. Using these symbols, the public relation department launched an aggressive campaign to praise the Shivraj Singh government. Some journalists, who were close to the Hindu right, peddled this propaganda.

Political observers argue that giving Adivasis their Constitutional rights and protecting their identity don’t seem to be Chauhan’s priority. Similarly, upholding the rule of law and ensuring social justice appears to be less important to him than assim-

ilating Adivasis into the majority fold.

Under his regime, the Adivasi community remains the most vulnerable. While their population is 8.6% of the country, they constitute 21% population in Madhya Pradesh. Out of 230 assembly seats, 35 constituencies are reserved for the tribal community. Since the anti-incumbency sentiments are getting stronger in Madhya Pradesh, Chauhan does not want to further alienate the Adivasi community. It is these compulsions that prepared him to go for washing the victim’s feet.

Irrespective of what the BJP claims, the official figures point to the utter failure of its government to give justice to Adivasis. The Adivasi community in the state mostly live in rural and remote areas. It is the most vulnerable and marginalized social group. Social, health, educational and developmental indicators show that they are very backward. For example, a large number of them live below the poverty line (55.3% in 2011-12) in the state. The low literacy rate (50.6%) among them is also a cause of concern. Adivasis have very little access to healthcare facilities. The Infant mortality rate is high (113 per 1000 live births) in Madhya Pradesh. The availability of tap water to them is very low (3.2%) in the state, against the national average (10%).

Similarly, the tribal population living in the state has poor sanitary fa-

cilities (6.7%) as against the national average of 17%. The drainage facility for the Adivasi community is very low (1.9%). While the BJP government has failed to give the Adivasi community their rights, the exploitation of resources within their areas continues. Along with it, the aggressive campaign to assimilate them into the majoritarian fold has been carried out by the Sangh Parivar with state support. Worse still, Madhya Pradesh is notorious for crimes and atrocities against the Adivasi community. According to the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) data, the highest number of cases (over 2,400) of crime against the ST community living in Madhya Pradesh was reported in 2020.

The gravity of the matter demands that the state should take radical steps to address their social, educational and economic backwardness and ensure that the vulnerable group is under protection. Similarly, the Adivasi community should be given the freedom to lead their lives as per their customary practices and faiths. But the Shivraj Singh government has once again failed to go beyond symbolism. Even his symbolism is reactionary. The policy of his government sometimes goes against the rule of law.

While the state government was right to book the perpetrator of the crime and begin the investigation, the administration was not justified in

demolishing the accused’s house. The administration’s claims that one-third of Shukla’s house was “illegally constructed” seems to be a lame excuse. Even if a part of his house was “illegal”, it cannot be razed without following the due process of the law. That is why his family members cannot be rendered homeless for the crime of one person. Even if Shukla appears to have committed a grave crime, he cannot be punished without following due legal procedures.

The rolling out of bulldozers and demolishing the houses of criminals cannot have a place in a democracy. Similarly, the statement by the CM’s office that he would bury the criminal ten feet deep if the need arises is undemocratic and against the spirit of the law. In a democratic set-up, the roles of the executive and the judiciary are separated and any interference might lead to the rise of authoritarianism. Similarly, the spectacle of the CM washing the feet of the Adivasi’s victim as well as giving him idols is an attempt to perpetuate the dominant culture of the majority community and try to erase the victim’s distinct identity.

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The Adivasi community